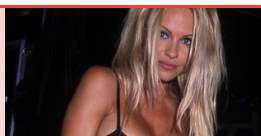


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The Prison Letters of Timothy McVeigh

On the anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing, revisit this story about the killer, from his cell, without a care in the world. ▲

E By [Phil Bacharach](#) Jun 11, 2015



Above: Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh sits for an interview with Rob Night and his attorney Stephen Jones while in prison June 23, 1995 in Oklahoma City, OK. Timothy McVeigh was executed on June 11, 2001. The following exchange of correspondence was published in the May 2001 issue of *Esquire*.

I expected the bogeyman.

But something different happened. It was February 1996, less than a year after the Oklahoma City bombing, when I met Timothy McVeigh. He shook my hand and smiled, joked that Oklahoma radio devoted too much time to high school basketball, reminisced about winters as a kid in upstate New York. His cheerfulness seemed genuine — he explained that lawyers and reporters were about his only social outlet — but entirely out of place in the gray meeting room at the El Reno, Oklahoma, Federal Penitentiary. And entirely out of place coming from a man who had murdered 168 people and injured more than have hundred others.

I had arrived at the federal building twenty minutes after the bombing. I can still see the black smoke that lingered over the skyline after the explosion and whole blocks downtown glittering with broken glass. I can still hear a paramedic telling me how he placed the bodies of dead children in rows on what had been the federal building's daycare playground. I remember the hands of a man shaking as he fumbled through his wallet to show me a photo of his dead daughter. As the days and weeks wore on, I remember breaking into raw its of sobbing.

I covered the bombing for the Oklahoma Gazette, a weekly in Oklahoma City, but I first glimpsed the perpetrator of the crime the same way that the rest of the world did: on TV, handcuffed and wearing a prison-issue orange jumpsuit as FBI agents led him out of a rural-Oklahoma courthouse. It was a lasting image—the military buzz cut, eyes narrowed and lips tight, his thin face drained of emotion—that was not the Tim McVeigh whom I would, improbably, come to know. And it is this fact—that he was not dead behind the eyes, a sheer lunatic—that troubles me most. He didn't have the right to be normal, to be glib and pleasant, I thought. He owed the dead of Oklahoma City the decency of at least showing his evil. In November 1996, I wrote about my prison interview with McVeigh in the Gazette. Several days after the issue came out, I received a two-page letter handwritten and torn from a yellow legal pad. Tim McVeigh wanted to set the record straight.

26 NOV 96

Phil,

After reading your most recent article, I am tempted to use it as a springboard to start correcting some of those "myths" that you mention. In the interest of brevity (and fearing the wrath of my attorneys), however, I will stick to a single issue.

I commend you for your excellent recall and your absolute fairness.

(Now I know why you can't get a job at The Washington Post.) Your notes on one point, though, are slightly inaccurate. You quote me as saying that the FBI are "wizards at PR." What I actually said is that they are wizards of propaganda—which Webster's defines as "information or ideas methodically spread to promote or injure a cause." This is where I drew the parallel between the FBI's efforts in my case, and those at Waco.

The idea is that once the FBI can control the show of information, they can then determine their target. In my case, I have been sealed away in federal prison and denied most visitation and free communication.

At Waco, once the FBI blocked the Davidians' abilities to communicate with the outside world, Bob Ricks [an FBI official at Waco] could then step forward and mold the facts to fit the FBI's purposes. The public never saw the Davidians' home video of their cute babies, adorable children, loving mothers, or protective fathers. Nor did they see pictures of the charred remains of children's bodies. Therefore, they didn't care when these families died a slow, torturous death at the hands of the FBI. They didn't care when boastful FBI agents posed for the cameras as people's lives were consumed in flames.

In both situations, as with Richard Jewell, you only hear one side of the story, and it is usually not truthful. If you have trouble believing that the Justice Department are adept liars—come to one of my pretrial hearings, to the trial itself, or ask Richard Jewell.

People need to question and analyze what they hear, and ponder the motivations of those spreading the propaganda. The truth lies deeper.

Thanks for your time, Tim

I was surprised that Waco still weighed so heavily in his thoughts and surprised that in writing with such feeling for the children of Waco, he either missed or denied to himself the obvious irony. I was uncertain what to do with the letter. Several months later, during jury selection for McVeigh's federal trial in Denver, I wrote a short article about it.

The story caused a minor stir, and it prompted an FBI agent to come to the Gazette offices and confiscate the letter. The agent used a rubber glove to retrieve it and gingerly place it in a plastic evidence bag.

McVeigh continued to write me. His next letter arrived a few weeks after the federal jury had sentenced him to death. By then, he was housed in Supermax, a modern-day Alcatraz at the foot of the Rocky Mountains in southern Colorado.

Squirreled away in a twelve-by-seven-foot cell, McVeigh pored over news stories, some of which reaffirmed his more menacing views of the government. (I bear some responsibility for this, having sent him several news clippings he asked for, in hopes of landing another, longer interview.) Several controversies blended together and became part of the McVeigh doctrine. 1) In Oklahoma, the family of a dead federal inmate, Kenneth Trentadue, alleged that he had been murdered by prison guards at Oklahoma City's Federal Transfer Center. Authorities countered that Trentadue hanged himself with a knotted bedsheet. 2) Federal grand jurors in Denver were complaining that their longtime investigation of environmental crimes at the Rocky Flats nuclear-weapons plant had been stymied by government officials. And 3) The Bureau of Land Management in New Mexico faced allegations of falsifying records.

8/31/97

I'm spending this NFL Sunday catching up on my correspondence, and wanted to touch base. However, I must admit that I have this nagging concern that you'll grab this letter and go running to the FBI! Cut me some slack, dude—this one is a personal letter from me to you (and next time—make 'em light for it, you brown-noser!)

Re: Trentadue: The crime is bad enough—but, as in other cases, it's the subsequent coverup that should give cause for reflection. Look at the Rocky Flats G.J. scandal here in Colorado, or the BLM scandal in New Mexico, or the countless efforts by those who are supposed to uphold the public trust—to hide the truth, to evade responsibility, and to deter accountability.

You see, Phil, "Waco" does not stand alone in the eyes of the "patriot" community. It's the cumulative picture that is most revealing to those who dare look at it. If they'd but look, they'd see.

McVeigh eventually wrote more than twenty letters, which grew more expansive and informal as time went on. The Trentadue matter and other alleged government conspiracies continued to hold his attention. But by and large, McVeigh's letters were scarcely political. He had other interests.

2-27-98

Friday

Hey Phil,

Time for a purely "social" letter—it's been a while. Thing is, I get so tired of writing (wish I had access to a word processor) that I tend to

abbreviate my points—and not get my ideas across.

On my mental list of "things I want to talk to Phil about": Trentadue.

I have a lot to say about this case, but the tedious effect of the printed word may well limit my discussion.

You see, I've learned quite well how the BOP (and DOJ) [the Bureau of Prisons and the Department of Justice] work—both officially and behind-the-scenes, so this offers me a unique insight into the Trentadue matter.

Clearly, the BOP and DOJ are covering up. Murder? Well, that is only inferred because of the obvious coverup—but there's really no other reason for such an effort, is there?

I think that the Trentadue family is learning something I've seen for a long time: There is no justice when the government is asked to police their own. Time and again, they will protect their own and do whatever is necessary to stonewall and cover up. They have no problem pressing civil rights violation charges against New York City cops who beat and rape a Haitian—but there's no such violation evident when (reference: Ruby Ridge) a 14-year-old kid is strafed in the back; when orders are issued (apparently by a phantom) for an assassination; when a suspect (Weaver) is shot in the back, or another suspect is shot running away from conflict (and a woman is inadvertently killed). I refer you to (a vaguely recalled) opinion by a DC court recently: "Government officials never seem to learn that the coverup is oftentimes worse than the underlying conduct."

Regarding all these "camera malfunctions"—amazing coincidence, huh? Personally, I have a camera in my cell (which is said to be "for my own protection"), even though the hall outside my cell is watched by "criss-crossing" cameras on either end.

The gate ("trap") into that hall is watched by "camera," and the same for the 4 other halls, and 4 other traps it takes to get to me. Additionally, it takes two sign-in logs to get to me—but one is standard for entering the entire area.

With all these systems, I have no doubt that, were I ever killed (not suggesting such an atmosphere exists, but there's always a "renegade" in every crowd)—there would be a system-wide "malfunction" that day.

To tell me that they videotaped the Trentadue scene, but there was a "camera malfunction" delies belief.

Okay, I had other points on the Trentadue case, but sure enough, the

slow process of writing has caught up to my brain—and has slowed it down, also.

What else did I want to yak with you about?

Oh, your story on the unsealed documents.

While I can always hand something wrong with a story, I will refrain from mentioning its faults. Instead, I will say that I always appreciate a reporter who fact-checks and researches a story, as opposed to those reporters who just print verbatim what a document says. Some reporters will print anything—no matter how much it seems to defy common sense.

I still watch King of the Hill, although it has lost some of its original pair. Simpsons once in a while has a good comeback—but they're pretty much out of originality, too. (An exception would be the Simpsons where Homer became an astronaut. That was an all-time great! The newsman reminded me of Peter Jennings: "All hail the ants!", and I think we can all relate to Homer's slow uptake, then shock, on the conclusion of Planet of the Apes.)

Anyway—King of the Hill. As the article you sent states: "The most realistic people on TV." Next time you see Hank Hill riding his red lawnmower—think of those CNN shots of my Dad doing the same. It's a carbon copy!

And I liked (they don't do it much anymore) all the conspiracy theories of the neighbor (whatever his name), because believe it or not, I used to laugh at—and debunk—many of those theories myself. (In fact, I came to recognize the absurdity and non-common sense of many of those stories, and documented it with photos—but enough of me still feeling defensive and damaged by accusation, 'cause we were yappin' about a cartoon!)

Lest you think I'm only a mindless cartoon addict, I will admit that I am a Star Trek junkie, too. (Whenever one of this unit's "panic alarms" goes off—I start screaming: "Red Alert! Shields up!")

(Hey! It gives me something to do! A man has to exercise his vocal cords on something!)

This is bad—I'm writing a reporter a 5-page social letter. Don't tell the attorneys!

Take care, Phil.

Tim

McVeigh wrote other reporters, too. Although he often excoriated his chief trial attorney, Stephen Jones (whom he came to hate), for having courted the media, he embraced and exploited his own celebrity. McVeigh appreciated that journalists (including me) would indulge his manipulations in hopes of getting an interview.

In March 1998, he wrote a reporter from KOCO-TV, Oklahoma City's ABC affiliate, to assail Oklahoma County district attorney Bob Macy, who had vowed to proceed with a state trial against McVeigh for the 160 bombing deaths not listed in the federal indictment.

In his rant, he called the DA a "bow-tie Bozo" whose resolve for a state trial was "in defiance of all logic and reason." I wrote McVeigh to ask him why he felt compelled to publicly attack Macy.

APRIL 02, 1998

I was basically "throwing down the gauntlet," so-to-speak. I am sick of hearing "Bozo" brag about how he's going to press state charges—hey, shit or get off the pot, buddy! He is really milking this for all it's worth, and the taxpayers of Oklahoma are the ones who will end up sucked dry. Macy is a punk.

As far as the personal insults—I decided that after taking 2+ years of his crap, it was time to give a little back!

Macy's state charges are pointless (at this time, anyway). Even if found guilty and sentenced to death, state appeals will last at least a decade . . . and who believes, in all practicality, that my federal verdict (good legal issues notwithstanding) will be overturned?

I could go on—the likely absence of key evidence; probability of a state conviction being overturned by a federal appellate court; etc.—but you get the point: It is clearly "bad karma" to proceed with state charges against me. However, if Macy wants to remain pig-headed: I'm game. Let's play! If he thinks he's scaring me, well, he hasn't read me too well!

Listen, Phil, I have nothing against the citizens of Oklahoma (except the continuing "woe-is-me" crowd), and I hate to have to use them as "funding-pawns" in a game between Macy and I—but if Macy persists, I will engage him.

He was the master of his case and could recite it chapter and verse. But McVeigh used the minutiae to detect any inquiry into his crime, and, for that matter, he never even acknowledged the crime, the act, the sin, at all, not even in the abstract. But the "woe-is-me" crowd reference is without doubt the most repulsive thing he wrote in the course of the correspondence.

4-9-98

I know you saw the IRS Simpsons this week, right?!? Montgomery Burns:

"Oppression and harassment are a small price to pay for freedom."

. . . or how about Homer's "sting" at the bar?

"Me and my militia buddies have plans to beat up a bunch of government officials. . . ."

"You're under arrest for conspiracy!!"

I'm still laughin'!

By now, McVeigh had begun to conceal his letters by folding them in pages ripped from glossy magazines. These sheets initially were advertisements for cologne and liquor and the like; eventually, they were devoted exclusively to pictures of sexy models and then pornography.

More and more, McVeigh's letters betrayed a preoccupation with his portrayal in the press.

APRIL 11, '98

Saturday

Lousy S.O.B.,

Yesterday was Good Friday; tomorrow is Easter; and it's been so long since I've been to church (except Christian Identity) (kidding!), I have no clue what today is, besides Saturday. Anyway, today is letter-writing day, and I think I owe you one.

Random thoughts before I forget them:

1.) Not looking forward to Macy & Co. getting "evidence" because anything "negative" about my past (and let's be real—we all have that kind of stuff) will be leaked shortly thereafter. If you think the leaks were bad before, I can't imagine how bad (in amount) they'll be shortly.

2.) There is, of course, "good" stuff that balances the bad, but that won't make the "leak cut" (or the FBI never follows up on those details, making the 302's [FBI witness statements] one-sided).

You see, it is a sound-byte world out there, yet these questions are too in-depth to answer with "sound bytes." I could not answer these questions without distortion—and with balance—unless I was given about 30

minutes each, orally, to explain my answers in-depth and completely.

Speaking of visits, I've had two media visits since arriving in August, and both have been limited to an hour (apparently by BOP). See if you can arrange about 2 hours—'cause I hate to rush (especially with a Plexiglas barrier between us which impedes efficient communication).

I've been feeling post-lunch fatigue for 2 pages now, so let me wrap this up before I become completely incoherent.

I've got the radio on in the background (UHF dial on the TV), and it sounds as if Bob Seger understands the call of the road, too. It's funny that because of "Travelling Man" he is not also called a "loner" and/or a "drifter." It's all about spin isn't it?

Nap-time!

Later, Tim

Along with the letter, he sent a newspaper clipping with the headline SWISS BANK VOWS TO FIGHT NAZI GOLD SUIT: U. S. LAWYER PLANNING NEW CLASS-ACTION CLAIM. He underlined a passage noting that most of the gold that the Swiss National Bank bought from Nazi Germany during World War II had been looted from occupied countries. In the margin, McVeigh added in his small, left-leaning scrawl: "Have you ever read Ayn Rand's Atlas Shrugged? That's what comes to mind when I read things like this; the 'tobacco settlement'; Microsoft anti-trust charges; etc. And while we're at it, why stop here in remembering what is, essentially, 'spoils of war'?! (I don't have adequate space to list examples!) This is ridiculous! (but you can't say that because it's non-P.C.)"

By this time, three years after the bomb blast, Oklahoma City still endured constant reminders of the April 19, 1995, explosion. The Oklahoma City National Memorial Foundation was planning a large memorial where the nine-story Alfred. P. Murrah Federal Building once stood. A grand jury in Oklahoma County heard testimony on theories of the crime. McVeigh's federal appeals continued to wind through the courts while his coconspirator, Terry Nichols, received a life sentence for his role in the bomb plot. Locally, the bombing had spurred a rise in social pathologies: domestic abuse, alcoholism, drug addiction, suicide.

In May 1998, Theodore Kaczynski, the Unabomber, became McVeigh's neighbor. Along with World Trade Center bombing mastermind Ramzi Yousef, they made up the trio of Supermax's most notorious inhabitants.

MAY 22, 1998

Friday PM

I have started this letter 3 times and have so far failed to put my thoughts into any meaningful or coherent order. This is a reflection of my haggard mental state at this time (due mostly to fatigue/lack of sleep). I'll try again. . . . This place has turned into a complete circus.

Now I'm gonna mention this, but don't you dare discuss it in future letters . . . as it would probably be considered a security breach and cause to restrict my mail privileges (although I write it with no criminal intent, so I have no problem telling you).

Kaczynski is literally my neighbor—and hence, most of my problems stem from this.

Before he arrived, I was moved to a "new" cell (there are 4 on this range). After I thoroughly cleaned it (my new home), they moved me back here (to my original cell) after 3 weeks. My cell had been brutally thrashed by a pig-inmate (Luis Felipe—he's resident #3. His story appeared in The New York Times. He lives like a pig—crap smeared on the walls, etc.), so I began cleaning again. Guess who they moved into the one I had just cleaned?!? Kaczynski. Things just get worse from there, including a change (to my detriment) to their lighting policy (in my cell only) at night; a guard stationed out front of my neighbor, who, depending on personality can engage in 8-hour arbitrary harassment (clicking cuffs, etc.)—all right after I get a favorable 6-month review. (It's a conspiracy, I tell ya!)

So things have been far from stable here.

As for the final episode of Seinfeld; after much internal strife, I opted for Unforgiven on ABC (possibly the best movie ever made). Fuck ABC for having me have to make such a decision in the first place; but I didn't have a VCR and may never have seen Unforgiven again.

I agguered I could catch Seinfeld on a re-run, but after viewing it during commercial breaks on ABC, I didn't really care to see it. It looked lame, and I did see the ending—dumb.

That was the only bright spot this May: In a span of 4 days, I saw Unforgiven, Forrest Gump, and The Rock (All on my "Top Ten Movies" list.)

One of the guards out in the hall last night told another of the shootings at the school in Springfield, Oregon. The other guard's response? (I'm not kidding. . . .)

"Job security."

08 AUG 98

The past few months have been a transitional period for me—and around here. The extremely brief summary . . .

—I've been moved to a better section of the prison

—Nichols arrived at the prison about week-and-half ago

—Mike Fortier [a former friend of McVeigh's, convicted of charges related to the bombing] is also here—surprising, after I read transcript of sentencing

—"case" stuff, etc.

—and the best: new TV stations! (So many movies, so little time . . .)

*I have decided to cut down on my letter-writing to everyone, as it was consuming me as a burden. I am instead going to develop the "retirement" attitude, and relax some more in front of the TV. (I recently discovered *The Outer Limits*, which reminded me of some of the intellectually-stimulating shows I was ignoring.)*

*I read [David] Hoffman's book [The Oklahoma City Bombing and the Politics of Terror] so long ago, it's hard to remember. I of course was pleased to read his extended mitigation of my character—until the Manchurian Candidate stuff (e.g. When pondering a "survivalist" mindset, no one seems to bother reflecting on the era I was raised in nor my personal life experiences—but Hoffman touched on it briefly, at least. I could name the movies of my generation all day—from *Omega Man* to *WarGames*, to *The Day After*, *Red Dawn*, and on and on. Then there was the gas crisis, the Blizzard of '77, etc.*

When reading any book, you must separate wheat from chaff to hand value. Some people reject books in whole b/c they cannot do this, or don't know how.

OCTOBER 09, 1998

*Penthouse . . . began arriving mysteriously about a month ago. Now, with *Hustler* also a regular arrival, I don't think I could be happier! (Ditto for the other guys in the range, whom I share freely with. The magazines, that is!)*

It's been quite a busy month for me so far: Appeal rejection; 302's to state; en banc rejection; Stephen Jones book and law review articles. With all this reading to do, it's a good thing that the new TV season

doesn't have much to offer Mon—Thu's. Fridays thru Sundays, they have increased the number of science- shows, so I've been keeping occupied with those.

The prison showed Contact (Jodie Foster) a while back, and I enjoyed that more than any movie in a long time. Deep. And how about that chick in The Fifth Element?! Oww! Last week's good movie was Grosse Pointe Blank (notice that Blank reads Discover, too!) Funny; I could connect; and it's about time they featured a real light—one where the guy doesn't drop dead from a Chuck Norris-single-kick-crap!

Fuckin' prison and AMC! I've been waiting for someone to air Planet of the Apes since I got here. Well, the prison decides (via prisoner polls) to drop AMC for USA network about a month ago. About a week after the switch, AMC features not only Planet of the Apes, but the whole series: Battle for; Conquest of; Beneath; Escape!

D'oh!! Missed it all!

How do you turn a fox into a cow? Marry her!

Later, Tim

POSTMARKED DECEMBER 14, 1998:

A Christmas card, with Santa on the front. Inside, the canned greeting: "Hope your Christmas season is bright with joy and cheer—Hope every day is happy, too, till Christmas comes next year!" Signed: "Happy Holidays! Tim."

The Oklahoma County grand jury wrapped up its work in late 1998, concluding that McVeigh and Nichols acted alone. McVeigh, however, was more interested in discussing Bob Macy, who still wanted a state trial.

1-22-99

Macy continues to "put off" state charges. Every 3 months, it's "another 3 months." Is he:

A.) Maximizing tax-dollar suck;

B.) So rabid to charge that he announces, then as date approaches, aides talk sense into him; or,

C.) Waiting for the Clinton scandal to blow over, so nothing takes the spotlight off of him?

Also noted some basic errors of known fact in grand jury report—copy of Turner Diaries in car (not!); ammonium nitrate found on my shirt

(not!); PETN ("from Primadet") on pockets. (no—FBI lab notes that Primadet has HMX (not detected on me), not PETN!); etc.

Out of space, you know the deal . . .

Later, Tim

In the "bombers wig" of Supermax prison, McVeigh eventually warmed up to his fellow celebrity inmates, Kaczynski and Yousef. The trio, allowed outside in the prison exercise yard for ten hours each week, sometimes made small talk, separated by small individual wire-mesh enclosures. Yousef and Kaczynski discussed languages while McVeigh chatted with them about the movies they watched on the twelve-inch black-and-white TVs in each cell.

By this time, I had told McVeigh of my plans to eventually publish his correspondence. He consented, provided that I not publish some of his comments about his former friends Michael and Lori Fortier—"Please, no attacking Mike or Lori 'from the grave,' okay?"—and used the opportunity to explain a remark he had made in a letter more than a year earlier.

10 FEB 99 WED

Phil,

Thanks for the letter, then the article. Re: That article on Yousef and I—do you have any idea where that story first appeared? It says "earlier news reports," and tracking down the original story could help me to identify the big mouth (whether that be an inmate on a different range or one of the prison staff, etc.).

Oops, and I better clarify why *The Rock* counts as a "best movie" candidate! . . . (else I can imagine the comments!). Technical accuracy was groundbreaking and set a new standard for realism (in my view, anyway). (Unforgiven still gets my vote for best overall movie.)

You asked about my current viewing habits—I've lost touch with *Simpsons* (although I catch it occasionally), and abandoned *King of the Hill*. That show *Family Guy* was great (shown after Super Bowl), but it was loaded with too many puns and jokes and reflections on culture. "Too many" b/c you're just digesting one line and a new one comes at you before you've finished with the first!

I don't know how much of a science fan you are, but such shows take up most of my viewing time these days. I enjoy the combination of a good fantasy story and, many times, excellent reflection on current cultural, social, political trends. I hand *The Outer Limits* to be exceptional in this

regard, but there's also the old stand-bys: *Star Trek: Next Generation* and *Voyagers*, and *Stargate* comes up with a good episode once in a while (and when they don't, the action is still good).

His final letter to me arrived the following month.

12 MAR 99

When will the story break that federal policy only allows for 6 (or 12) "victim-witnesses" at my execution? (Quick—stampede to Congress! "We want closed-circuit feed!")

Several months later, I took a job in the Oklahoma state government. McVeigh had no use for me after that, and I gave up expectations of learning anything more about him. In July 1999, he was transferred to the federal death-row facility in Terre Haute, Indiana. By most accounts, his living conditions were marginally more restrictive than those at Supermax. He still bristled at depictions of himself in the media, and last year he even put aside his aversion to TV news to try to rehabilitate his image on 60 Minutes.

Now he appears ready to die.

McVeigh will get his wish; on May 16, the federal government will provide a closed-circuit feed of his death to the survivors of the bombing who want to see it.

It is beyond me to reconcile the Timothy McVeigh who murdered 168 people with the writer of these letters. True, this correspondence offers only a small window through which to look. I do know one thing: In the written word, at least, he has not a whisper of conscience.

Now I sit here and look at this stack of letters. Not long ago, I read through them again. And I imagined that were he writing them today, as his death approaches, maybe he wouldn't be so blithe, so apparently carefree. And then I heard from someone that Timothy McVeigh was still writing letters. I heard that he was still watching TV, still cracking jokes. I heard that Timothy McVeigh seemed happy.

—

Published in the May 2001 issue.

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